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Assignment Sequence

Government 100.03 (Fall 1987)

Introduction

Containment and Hegemony:
The Politics of Imperial Decline

The following text includes a copy of each assignment as it was received by the students in Government 100.03, accompanied by a brief rationale describing the assignment's general purpose and its relation to other course activities.

As is appropriate for a course in government, my seminar focused on persuasive argumentation. Early writings emphasized description and analysis of international relations and foreign policy theories; students then practiced applying theories to particular documents and historical periods. After these two stages, the assignments involved taking policy positions and then integrating those positions with theoretically-informed long-range strategies. This progression of assignments corresponded with the four-part organization of the course: The first covered international relations theories about declining hegemony; the second covered the history of the Cold War, with containment as the organizing theme; the third covered the competing foreign policy strategies of Carter and Reagan; and the fourth returned to the systemic, long-term considerations that were introduced in the first part.

Throughout the course, I introduced progressively more sophisticated techniques for recognizing and constructing effective arguments. Part of this came out of straightforward lectures on the qualities of a good argument (using Toulmin, Karapin, and others), but most of it came through repetitive writing efforts, including outlining and preliminary thesis statements.

The following assignments and their rationales reflect this general agenda. That this appears to outweigh other writing tasks is somewhat misleading: Issues involving verb usage, syntax, sentence structure, paragraph organization, transitions, and so forth were emphasized throughout the course, but on a personal basis. I worked on these issues primarily at an individual level, using paper comments and office meetings to deal with writing problems particular to each student. Substantial class time was spent on various writing issues that were problems for the class as a whole. However, this did not consistently correspond with particular assignments; accordingly, such efforts do not tend to appear in the following rationales.

Government 100.3
Assignment 1

The "Irancon" scandal has dominated American media attention for several months now. At the center of that attention has been one key figure--Colonel Oliver North. To some, North did everything wrong: he made policy decisions without proper authority, lied to Congress, destroyed critical evidence, and in general subverted the democratic process. To others North did everything right: he carried out his superior's orders with verve and daring, acted in the national interest, protected the secrecy necessary to covert operations, and in general exhibited great patriotism.

What do you think? Are either of these characterizations correct, or would you describe North in some other fashion? Write a two page essay that supports your position, using whatever logic and evidence that you think best supports your case.

Rationale

As with most Freshman seminars, this first assignment is designed to give the instructor an essay from which he or she can assess the student's writing capabilities. I chose this particular topic because of how widely publicized and contentious Oliver North and the Iran-contra issue were at the time (that is, I could expect the students to know a little about the issues and to have some sort of position on them). The assignment is also relevant to later topics in the course: 1) Reagan's Persian Gulf policy (where our relations with Iran are critical); 2) Reagan's Central American policy; and 3) Lowi's thesis about the pathological way in which domestic politics drives foreign policy. Furthermore, the argumentative aspect of the assignment foreshadows the type of writing that I emphasize in this course.

Government 100.3
Assignment 2

Both Rosecrance ("American Influence in World Politics") and Oye ("International Systems Structure and American Foreign Policy") argue that the structure of the international system creates basic constraints that US policy makers must adjust to. Each author also argues that recent American foreign policy has been out of synch with international realities. However, Rosecrance's argument rests on a logic of system polarity (the transition from bipolar to multipolar), whereas Oye's argument relies on the logic of declining hegemony.

In a 3-page essay, compare and contrast Rosecrance and Oye's central arguments. What is the logic of each argument? How comparable are each author's assumptions? Do both use the same kind of evidence? Which of these two views do you find more persuasive? Why?

Rationale

This assignment uses writing for reading: In-class writing assignments, class discussions, and this assignment require the student to read each text closely--that is, to identify the central propositions, the logic, and the supporting evidence. It is also an introduction to "systemic" thinking in international relations; since this does not tend to come easily, I devote a fair amount of in-class time to discussing the articles.

This essay follows a series of in-class discussions and writing assignments. At first, I organize the class into groups of three and give them 15-20 minutes to discuss the Rosecrance and Oye articles; after that, I ask them to outline the general argument of each author. The articles are then discussed with the entire class, where we iron out the arguments and their supporting logic. This process serves several functions: It gets the students talking to each other early in the semester; it gives them several opportunities to work out problems with what are fairly complex and theoretical articles; and it gives me the opportunity to explain some general principles of persuasive argumentation (using Toulmin and others), with the readings serving as case examples.

Overall, this process should give the students enough content and direction for the assignment that their papers should not be too big an intellectual struggle. I want them to realize that evidence alone is not conclusive, and that they need to analyze the assumptions and logic of each argument. Class discussions and pre-writing exercises are designed to give them the tools to do this.

So that the assignment is not overly conceptual, I also have the students read Lanham on verb usage and make a pitch myself for using active verbs. Problems with verb usage usually come up throughout the semester, so the earlier start the better. In addition, introducing this basic element of style here--in contrast to all the work on argument structure--reinforces the point that essays need to be revised several times and for different purposes.

Assignment 2 is followed by a revision exercise designed to highlight the student's own argument structure. I have the students write out the topic sentence for each paragraph and show how the sentences cohere around a central point (which they describe in one paragraph). I expect the students to have a difficult time with this; that is, the assignment is likely to work out as a learn-by-failure exercise. In conjunction with this exercise, I use some examples from their original papers to show problems with paragraph development and with overall argument structure.

Government 100-3
Assignment 3

It's late 1947 and you're struggling to make it as a low-level reporter on Time's Washington beat. You've just been given a key assignment for their special end of the year "State of the Nation" edition; if you produce you get a big bonus and a chance at the White House correspondent slot, but if you blow it you get the boot. Your editor has asked you to do this: In just three double-spaced pages (they're tight on space) summarize the recent brouhaha between "X" and Walter Lippmann, and use your respectable historical knowledge and reasoning skills to suggest which author makes more sense.

(Remember that you can only argue from the vantage point of late 1947, so you can't use events that have transpired since then to judge the articles or construct your opinion. Use Ambrose and class discussions to get a good sense of what the world looked like to Americans in 1947. The key to this assignment is to remember who your audience is.)

Rationale

At the level of content, this assignment gets the students to describe in simple terms (and within an historical context) the basic similarities and differences between Kennan and Lippmann. It follows a good deal of history reading, plus Kennan's "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" and Lippmann's rejoinder, "The Cold War." This represents a movement from the first section of the course (which focused on systemic international relations theories about America's changing position in the international system) to the second section (which is essentially a brief history of the Cold War, with containment as the organizing theme).

The structure of the assignment challenges the students with an unusual audience and allows them to experiment with a journalistic style. This is an intentional change in focus; it provides a break from the "heaviness" and conceptual difficulty of the previous set of assignments. It also provides a break from the emphasis on argumentation, allowing the student to focus more on tone, sentence structure, and stylistic control. To give the students some basis for understanding different styles and varying their own, I xerox and discuss in class several lively pieces of journalism from that period. For their essays, I encourage the students to imitate the style of one of the pieces.

Subsequent revision work consists of in-class paragraph editing for verb usage (introduced in the previous assignment) and sentence structure. We also discuss ways in which diction, sentence structure, and other devices contribute to tone.

Government 100.3
Assignment 4

Lowi claims that the President, in order to overcome the fragmentation and conflict inherent in America's political institutions, must for any given decision oversell the crisis and oversell the remedy. Although Lowi ties this observation to a theoretical argument about foreign policy decision-making, we simply want to analyze the rhetoric of a major Presidential policy statement to see if there are elements of "oversell."

In this assignment you are to analyze one of the following three documents that we have read: The Truman Doctrine, NSC-68, and Dulles' statements on international communism in Guatemala. Take the article that you have chosen and analyze the diction and tone. How would you describe the tone? Is it calm and rational, or tense and excited? Does it sound hyperbolic? Are there elements of "scare tactics"? How do the diction and sentence structure contribute to the tone that you describe? Also, having read Ambrose and Immerman, assess whether or not the text realistically addresses the threat at hand and the possible remedies. If not, does the program--as Lowi argues--overstress the doctrines of self-help and anticommunism?

Rationale

Assignment 2 focused on analyzing the logic of an argument and the use of evidence as backing; revision work emphasized the student's own argument structure. Assignment 3 focused on persuasion through stylistic innovation and compare and contrast techniques. This assignment emphasizes the relation of content to style and presentation. It utilizes assignment 3's focus on tone and diction, but in a more rigorous manner (one where the connection to content is much more clear). It also echoes assignment 2's concern with theory; however, instead of analyzing a theoretical argument this assignment asks the student to look for evidence of a theory in an historical document.

This assignment is issued in two stages. The students first hand in an outline, a thesis statement, and a draft of the closing paragraph. After these are critiqued and handed back, the students submit a complete draft. In this assignment I stress the writing process, encouraging students to use outlining to organize their ideas and structure their arguments. This effort builds on the revision work done for assignment 2.

Government 100.3
Assignment 5

For the last 40 years the concept of "containment" has been at the center of American foreign policy. In this course we have studied the genesis of containment in Kennan's Long Telegram, and the concept's gradual development through the Truman Doctrine, the X versus Lippmann debate, and NSC-68. We have also seen how containment affected the foreign policies of Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, LBJ, and Nixon.

However, the definition of containment is far from rigorous: Does it define a goal, or describe a strategy? What assumptions does it make about the international order, and are those assumptions valid? How does it define the Soviet Union and the US in relation to each other and to the rest of the world? What conception of "national security" does it presume? What are the key threats that it defines, and what types of responses does it suggest?

With these questions in mind, describe your understanding of "containment." Second, given your understanding of the term, assess how containment influenced US policy toward Vietnam from Eisenhower to Nixon. How did containment affect our definition of the problem? How did it shape our response? (In addressing these questions you may want to consider how containment relates interests to credibility.)

Rationale

The purpose of this assignment is simply to emphasize the point that containment, truly the backbone of postwar American foreign policy, has no rigorous definition or specific meaning. It was proposed by Kennan to respond to historically specific conditions; those conditions have changed drastically, but the notion of containment has not. I do not expect students to write good definitions. Rather, I want them to grapple with the contradictions of containment and, I hope, to identify a central irony: that the solution proposed in 1947 became the problem by the 1960s.

This assignment builds on the topic introduced in assignment 3. However, rather than looking at the early containment debate in a frozen historical context, this assignment asks the student to develop a conception of containment through the medium of critical questions, and then to explain how successive administrations used the concept--however formulated--to justify the Vietnam intervention. The objective in this second half, of course, is to get a first cut at some of the basic reasons for our involvement in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, I hope the students can identify and understand the differences (and contradictions) between containment as a strategy, as an ideology, and as a policy.

This assignment is preceded by substantial in-class pre-writing exercises on the definition of containment. In one exercise, students are divided into groups of two and are asked to discuss and then describe how 2 different presidents would probably have described containment (the choice of postwar presidents is distributed randomly among the class). The similarities and differences between these statements are then used as

the basis for a class discussion. On a separate day, I ask students at the outset of the class to define containment as a national security strategy, and then to describe containment as an ideology of anti-communism. This also is used as the grounds for a class discussion, one in which I also describe Kennan's own accounts of how his original notion was, to his mind, misconstrued and misapplied from the outset.

This assignment also foreshadows assignments 8 and 9, where the concept of containment is applied to current policy dilemmas.

Government 100.3
Assignment 6

Policy position: Persian Gulf

In a 2 to 3 page paper, develop a position on current US policy in the Persian Gulf. In your paper briefly describe what interests we have in the region (you may want to rank the different reasons that we discussed in class) and what sort of policy response would best serve those interests. Be prepared to explain and support your position in the next class session.

Rationale

This is the first of a set of assignments which lead up to a full policy position paper (the final assignment) on the Persian Gulf or Central America. Here students briefly develop an initial position on the Persian Gulf. Instead of handing the papers into me, I have them exchange the papers among themselves and ask them to read and critique each other's work. Comments are returned to the original author along with the first draft; that author then re-writes the position paper in response to the critique. The entire set of writing is then turned into me for comments and suggestions.

This process has several objectives: First, it engages the students in direct, written dialogue with each other; second, it gives them several cuts at developing a policy position through both writing and class discussions; and third, it allows them to hone a position which they can use in the final paper.

In addition, throughout the course we discuss current affairs by keeping up with relevant articles in the New York Times (part of the course's required reading). By this point we have frequently discussed recent events, particularly those regarding the Persian Gulf and Central America. The students should have clipped numerous articles, and I supplement this material with articles xeroxed from the Christian Science Monitor and the Washington Post. I also encourage students to do brief library research if they do not have adequate material to develop or strengthen their case. Assignments 6 and 7 are the first to explicitly draw from the readings and discussion of current events. They are used as first cuts at positions that they students can apply in their final 2 papers.

Government 100.3
Assignment 7

Policy position: Central America

In a 2 to 3 page paper, develop a position on US policy in Central America. In your paper briefly describe what interests we have in the region (you may want to rank the different reasons that we discussed in class) and what sort of policy response would best serve those interests. Be prepared to explain and support your position in the next class session.

Rationale

This assignment has the same objective as assignment 6, although with a different policy area. The process of exchanging and critiquing each other's papers is repeated with this assignment.

Government 100.3
Assignment 8

The Cold War will in fact end someday, and in some form... (It) may end with a bang or a whimper or--more likely--something in between, but it will end, as all historical episodes sooner or later do.

When the Cold War does end, it will not do so with the total victory of one side and the unconditional surrender of the other: it will not be a replay of the Second World War.

The end of the Cold War will not bring an end to all international rivalries, or even to all aspects of the rivalry that now exists between the US and the Soviet Union...conflict in one form or another will remain a prominent feature of the international landscape, much as it was for millenia before the Cold War began.

This course has been organized around two themes: declining hegemony and containment. Regarding the former, we have read arguments that the United States is no longer the dominant actor in the international system, that it simply does not have the power and influence that it used to. Regarding the latter, we have seen how containment was formulated in the late 1940s by George Kennan, and how it was selectively interpreted and applied from Eisenhower through to Reagan. Much of the reading--and your own writing--has argued that containment is in many ways a flawed strategy: That the conditions at the time it was created no longer exist, or at least that the strategy has been overly simple and crudely applied.

One could argue, from either the perspective of declining hegemony or containment, that the US needs to change its understanding of the international system and start dealing with the Soviet Union and other nations on different terms. This is, in essence, saying that it's high time to end the Cold War. But what does this mean? Gaddis provides an interpretation in "How the Cold War Might End." As indicated by the above quote, he essentially argues that conflict and rivalry are endemic to international affairs, and that great power competition may in fact be good. In his conception, the Cold War may in some ways be desirable because it has been stable--despite all the tension. Ending the Cold War, then, implies changing the terms of the competition, but not expecting to remove competition and rivalry altogether.

During this course we have seen how several important foreign policy events (such as the Truman Doctrine, the Korean War, Vietnam, and several interventions in Central America) have fit into the long-term American strategy of containment. Recently, you have taken positions on current policy for the Persian Gulf and Central America. If, however, the larger strategy of containment is not viable (or if, because of declining hegemony, we no longer have the power to carry it out), then what should our long-term strategy be? That is, how should we redefine our national interests, and what type of long-term strategy would best serve those interests? Should we no longer be as concerned with containing the Soviet Union, or should we still try to stick to the general strategy of containment but simply go about it in a different way?

In this 3-page essay, I would like you to take one of your recent policy positions and explain how it fits into a larger strategy that responds to the problems of containment and the constraints imposed by declining hegemony. In particular, you need to answer two critical questions: 1) What are America's long-term national interests, and what type of strategy would meet those interests? 2) How does your policy suggestion--in the immediate term--fit into that strategy?

Rationale

This is the first assignment of the last part of the course, where the readings and class discussions return to the international relations themes of the first part (principally, that of declining hegemony). My general purpose in this section is to get students thinking about the long-term prospects for US foreign policy, and to tie their ideas about overall strategy to an immediate foreign policy concern. In other words, I ask them to integrate their policy positions with their historical work on containment and the Cold War and with their theoretical work on declining hegemony.

In-class writing work prior to this assignment focuses on structuring and organizing arguments through outlining and writing theme statements (a recurrent focus in the course, but particularly emphasized in the last two assignments). For this assignment, I run through 3 writing stages: 1) A loose prewriting exercise, where students search for a basic theme and an organizing principle; 2) An outline of the rough structure of their argument; and 3) A full outline which specifies the evidence and logic that they will use to support their claims. For class discussion, I select representative samples from this later stage and talk about the argument structure, the use of evidence, the rigor of the logic, and the implicit warrants that are required to tie the evidence and logic to a particular claim. I also urge the students to see me during office hours to discuss their outlines prior to writing their first draft.

By this stage of the course I have met with students several times (particularly through conferences, but also through regular office hours) about recurrent problems in their writing. In this assignment--the next to last--I ask them to focus on a personal writing agenda, as determined during the conferences and discussions.

This final assignment--an 8-10 page essay--is intended to tie together your recent writings and to synthesize the course thematically. In essence, it is an extended policy position paper; however, unlike many position papers, it must be attentive to both the long-term and the immediate-term.

In your paper briefly describe what you think are the major challenges that the US will face during the rest of this century, and from this picture derive a conception of what long-term strategy America should pursue. That is, in order to meet these challenges, how should we define our national interests? What type of long-term strategy would best serve those interests? For instance, should we no longer be as concerned with containing the Soviet Union, or should we still try to stick to the general strategy of containment but simply go about it in a different way? Remember that you will need to take into account not only US interests but also US capabilities. How can the US adjust to its relatively less powerful position in the international arena? In addressing these questions you should refer to the writings by Rosecrance, Oye, Gaddis, Kennedy, and Rostow.

To demonstrate what this means in practical terms, take a current policy issue-area--such as (but not limited to) the Persian Gulf or Central America--and develop a policy position to deal with the problems in that area. You should describe what the basic problem in the area is, how the US is currently responding to the problem, and how you think the US should be responding. This latter point is most important, for you need to demonstrate how your policy position furthers US interests in the short and the long-term. That is, you need to demonstrate how your policy position is consistent with what you think America's long-term strategy should be.

In sum, you should connect your notion of America's long-term interests with a particular policy response to a current foreign policy dilemma. You will probably want to directly incorporate material from assignment 8 and from one of your policy position papers. You will also need to indirectly draw on your understanding of declining hegemony (assignment 2), containment (assignments 3 and 5), and the problems of foreign policy making in the US (assignment 4).

Rationale

The basic purpose of this last assignment is to teach students how to write a fairly long research paper. The content is largely an extension of previous writing, so they do not need to struggle with an entirely new position on a new topic. Rather, I give them extensive comments on assignment 8 regarding the structure of their argument as well as each student's particular writing agenda, which essentially makes that assignment a preliminary draft for this one. However, in this last assignment I make the process of developing a long-term strategy more open-ended (by not tying it particularly to ending the Cold War); in addition, I ask them to describe the principle problems in their policy area and how the Reagan Administration has been approaching them. Describing and critiquing current policy requires some library research (not much), and I suggest some strategies for doing that.

In addition to the research process, I also spend class time on the use of citations, quotations, and other aspects of writing research papers.

